

# Industrial Violence in Colonial India

David Arnold

Discussion of the social aspects of industrialization in India has proceeded almost exclusively in terms of labor recruitment, factory conditions, and the development of trade unions. Although strikes have received detailed consideration, the industrial violence which formed a common and persistent feature of labor relations in colonial India has been largely ignored. Official reports of the period tended to play down the incidence of violence, not wishing to publicize the failings of government labor policies.<sup>1</sup> Or, where violence was acknowledged to have occurred, it was taken to indicate the immaturity and irresponsibility of Indian workers. Post-independence studies, drawing heavily on published official sources, have too readily equated labor history with a narrative of strikes, with union membership figures and labor legislation. A lingering Gandhian tradition has further influenced many Indian labor studies. Violence is regarded as too morally reprehensible and politically deviant to warrant serious analysis. Where admitted, it is attributed to communist politicians or other outside elements rather than to factors inherent within the labor situation.<sup>2</sup>

Violence in Indian industry was not confined to an awkward early phase of industrialization before workers had alternative means of self-expression. It persisted despite the creation and legal recognition of trade unions, despite the formal establishment of machinery for the peaceful resolution of labor disputes. The effect of these innovations was often to create new, but no less violent, conflict situations. From sudden attacks on management personnel inside the factories, violence shifted to confrontations outside the factory gates between strikers and the opposing blacklegs, police and troops. Nor, in spite of growing left-wing influence, was this the revolution-

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<sup>1</sup>In this submission to the Royal Commission on Labor, the Railway Board listed 48 strikes for the 1919–29 period, but noted serious violence in only 3 of them, with minor violence in 5 others: *Royal Commission on Labour in India* (hereafter *RCL*) (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1931), VIII, part 1, pp. 250–58. Examination of strikes for which no violence was listed shows many incidents of violence of the kinds discussed in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>For example, in V. B. Karnik, *Strikes in India* (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1967), p. 216, commenting on violence during the South Indian Railway strike, 1928.

ary violence of a proletariat striving to replace industrial capitalism with a new socio-economic order. The closest Western parallel is to be found in the machine-breaking and “collective bargaining by riot” of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century industrial workers in Britain.<sup>3</sup> But whereas in many Western countries the legal recognition of trade unions and the right to picket greatly reduced workers’ dependence on violence to express their grievances and urge their demands, in India this development was thwarted by the colonial and racial context of industrial labor. Indeed, the gulf between workers’ expectations of unions and strikes and the minimal level of labor activity tolerated by management and government created an atmosphere of bitterness and frustration more conducive to violence than to peaceful solutions.

In any given dispute it might be possible to find specific grievances and immediate causes to account for the incidence of industrial violence. But they would explain the spark, rarely the combustibility. The purpose here is to trace industrial violence back to its underlying causes, to the factors which disposed workers to express themselves through violent, rather than peaceful, means. Three main factors were involved, though not all were necessarily operative simultaneously or with equal prominence. First, rural India had a tradition of often violent protest against perceived injustice, and this was imported into the industrial setting by immigrant rural laborers. The transference of violence from the countryside to industrial towns is not uncommon in predominantly peasant societies. But it deserves to be stressed in the Indian context in view of the assumptions often made about the fatalism and passivity of India’s rural poor, and in view, too, of the divergence between popular traditions of violent protest and political norms of Gandhian non-violence.

Second, the “law and order” priorities of the colonial state gave little room for the development of effective trade unionism before independence in 1947, and thus inhibited workers from finding peaceful solutions for their grievances. Police and magisterial intervention often negated what might otherwise have been successful strike action; and even when, in the late 1920s, the government and many industrialists came to favor unionization, it was as an aid to controlling the workers. Unions were unable, therefore, to function in a way that gave satisfactory expression to workers’ attitudes and demands.

Third, both intra-class and inter-class conflict were exacerbated by racial, linguistic and social differences. In the extreme form of inter-class antagonism, where European managers and supervisors had little understanding of the language and culture of their Indian workers, industrial violence sprang from mutual incomprehension or took

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<sup>3</sup>E. J. Hobsbawm, “The Machine Breakers,” in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), pp. 5–22.

the form of retaliation for the physical threats and abuse of Europeans. The racial divide could also split the work force itself. The comparatively privileged position of European and Eurasian workers was deeply resented by Indians, and was often a root cause of violence, especially when the former refused to participate in Indians' unions and strikes.

Although the arguments advanced here are intended to have a general applicability to India (and to invite comparison with other colonial territories), the principal illustrations are drawn from the Madras Presidency of southern India. The main focus is on the railroads, in India, as in many other colonial and semi-colonial areas, one of the largest employers of industrial labor. Out of some four million industrial workers in India in the 1920s, nearly 900,000 worked for the railroads, rather more than were employed in textile mills. In the Madras Presidency in the early 1920s, there were approximately 32,000 employees involved in railroad administration and services, 22,000 manual laborers, and 16,000 workers in the mechanical and engineering workshops.<sup>4</sup> There were two main railroad systems in the province, the South Indian Railway and the Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway. India in the 1920s was second only to the United States of America in miles of track, and the railroads were of primary economic and military importance to the British colonial regime.

## I

Much has been written about the traditional origins of Gandhi's *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance).<sup>5</sup> Certain religious and social communities no doubt prided themselves on their attachment to *ahimsa* — Jains and Brahmins, for example. But for most Indians non-violence would appear to have been no more than a tactic, abandoned in favor of violent action once it had proved ineffective. In an instance of this, villagers at Urappanur in the Madurai district of Madras in 1862 first opposed the diversion of water from a channel which irrigated their fields by appealing to the District Collector. Failing to reach him in time, they sat down on the bank of the channel to prevent Public Works Department laborers from making the breach that would deprive them of their customary water supply. After an hour, when

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<sup>4</sup>*Census of India: Madras, 1921* (Madras: Government Press, 1922), XIII, part 2, pp. 198–99; *Madras Presidency Administration Report, 1924–5* (Madras: Government Press, 1925), p. 130.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., A. L. Bashyam, "Traditional Influences on the Thought of Mahatma Gandhi," in R. Kumar, ed., *Essays on Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 17–42; Howard Spodek, "On the Origins of Gandhi's Political Methodology: The Heritage of Kathiawad and Gujarat," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 30: 2 (February 1971), 361–72.

the police moved in to remove the villagers bodily, the protesters jumped to their feet and began to pelt the police with the stones that they had kept concealed ready for such an eventuality.<sup>6</sup> Thus, both passive and violent resistance were used by middle and rich peasants, and sometimes local landlords too, to resist the infringement of customary rights or excessive tax demands by superior landlords and the state.

The argument that middle peasants are particularly disposed to rebellion is now a familiar one. It is usually accompanied by observations on the dependence, and hence disinclination to rebel, of poor peasants and landless laborers — unless their normal shackles of restraint have been struck from them by a major political or military upheaval.<sup>7</sup> Nowhere has the apparent dependence and lack of “tactical power” of the rural poor been more emphasized than in India. Their position at the base of the caste hierarchy, with its attendant ideology of high-caste social and ritual supremacy, their reliance on wealthier villagers for employment and a share of the harvest or for customary dues for their services (the *jajmani* system), their long history of agrestic slavery and serfdom<sup>8</sup> — all these have made it possible for scholars to conclude that the rural poor were “too weak, and helpless, and socially fragmented, to offer any resistance, either to their immediate superiors, or to the State.”<sup>9</sup>

The poor did not, as a rule, seek to overturn the established social order, but they were not so weak and divided as to remain supine in the face of what they perceived as injustice. Their protests might form part of broader movements of rural revolt, such as the Rebellion of 1857–58 in northern India. At other times their economic interests and social expectations ran counter to those of their rural superiors. Then there were strikes against employing landlords and rich peasants over the division of the harvest, or the untouchables and low castes refused to perform such customary tasks as the removal of dead animals. The effectiveness of such action, generally confined to the defense of existing rights rather than the assertion of new demands, was limited,

<sup>6</sup>Judicial Proceedings, no. 90, 13 February 1862, Tamil Nadu Archives, Madras (hereafter T.N.A.).

<sup>7</sup>Hamza Alavi, “Peasants and Revolution,” in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., *The Socialist Register*, 1965 (London: Merlin Press, 1965), pp. 241–77; Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber, 1971), pp. 290–92.

<sup>8</sup>The literature on this subject is vast, but see especially, Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Scarlett Epstein, “Productive Efficiency and Customary Systems of Rewards in Rural South India,” in Raymond Firth, ed., *Themes in Economic Anthropology*, A.S.A. Monograph no 6 (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967), pp. 229–52; and, more generally, Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 1967), pp. 330–41, 378–85.

<sup>9</sup>Ravinder Kumar, “The Transformation of Rural Protest in India,” in S. C. Malik, ed., *Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilization* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), p. 272.

especially where solidarity with fellow caste members and laborers in neighboring villages was lacking,<sup>10</sup> but should not be dismissed as insignificant.

A more active form of rural protest — looting by landless laborers, village artisans, and poor peasants — occurred during periods of high food prices and incipient famine. This almost certainly had a long history, but may well have been on the increase during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time of frequent and widespread famine and an expanding, speculative grain trade. Formerly, landlords and rich peasants distributed part of their grain reserves to dependent laborers and artisans during periods of dearth, partly to be sure of their services in subsequent years, partly because charity towards the poor was considered virtuous and enjoined by religion. But as producers became increasingly involved in commercial grain marketing, and as an expanding population made the rural labor supply more plentiful, affluent villagers showed reluctance to distribute grain to the needy. In a fashion resembling that of eighteenth-century England or colonial Burma and Vietnam,<sup>11</sup> India's rural poor resisted this violation of a traditional "moral economy." Their indignation took the form of looting in village and small town markets and raids on the houses of grain-traders, moneylenders and landlords. Of short duration, such incidents could nonetheless be singularly effective in forcing either a temporary reduction in grain prices or the charitable distribution of foodstuffs by landlords and traders who feared further attacks. Resistance to the looters was rare; and to the comparative anonymity of a sudden pillage of the bazaar, or the darkness and confusion of a midnight raid, was added the reluctance of villagers to cooperate with the police. The latter usually arrived too late to catch looters red-handed. Arrests were few; convictions fewer. Dacoity (gang robbery) was another variant. Dacoits might be outlawed or impoverished members of locally dominant castes; but, particularly during periods of high prices and famine, poor peasants and landless laborers joined in or formed their own gangs. Unpopular moneylenders, landlords, and traders were again primary targets of attack, and retribution was as pronounced a characteristic of such dacoity as famine-induced panic and hunger.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously the rural poor were not in a state of perpetual turbulence, constantly at

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<sup>10</sup>Thomas O. Beidelman, *A Comparative Analysis of the Jajmani System* (New York: Association for Asian Studies, 1959), pp. 61–64; André Beteille, *Castes, Old and New: Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969), pp. 101, 188.

<sup>11</sup>E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, 50 (February 1971), 76–136; James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

<sup>12</sup>David Arnold, "Dacoity and Rural Crime in Madras, 1860–1940," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 6: 2 (January 1979), 140–67.

war with their masters and creditors. But, particularly during subsistence crises, they were capable of collective protest or broke away from their customary subordination to participate in organized crime. It would seem likely, too, that the violent reputation of some untouchable and low-caste groups protected them from even greater oppression. Force and the threat of violent retribution, even more than the withdrawal of labor, provided the rural poor with a limited degree of “tactical power.”

How were these rural traditions transmitted to modern industry? Although the composition of the industrial labor force varied from region to region, even from one industry to another, the bulk of industrial workers came from the rural poor — untouchables, tribals, low-caste laborers and artisans, poor peasants of various castes. Usually they were driven to seek factory employment by famine, indebtedness, land scarcity, and the decline of such traditional industries as handloom weaving. Among the railroad workers of the Madras Presidency, skilled and unskilled workers were drawn mainly from middle and poor peasant castes along with a large contingent of untouchables. Indian Christians, Muslims and members of artisan communities were present in lesser numbers.<sup>13</sup> Although the railroads of Madras, like those of the Bengal and Bombay presidencies, dated from the 1850s, there was a substantial expansion of the work force in the closing years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. Employees on the open lines rose from about 12,000 in 1881 to 33,500 in 1911; workshop employees probably increased more rapidly over the same period. Many of the industrial workers, at least until the 1920s, were thus first or second generation immigrants from the countryside. Morris D. Morris has persuasively argued against the old assumption that Indian factory workers were not “committed” to industrial employment and retained a semi-rural identity. But it should not be concluded in consequence that they abandoned rural social values, or forms of protest, once they entered the factory gates. As Dipesh Chakraborty has demonstrated for jute-mill workers in Calcutta in the 1890s upcountry immigrants often brought with them their old ways and might assert them with greater vigor in a new, still-unfamiliar, industrial environment.<sup>14</sup>

In the period before the widespread unionization of industrial workers in 1918–20, traditional forms of protest prevailed in the industrial context while organized strikes

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<sup>13</sup>Census of India: Madras, 1921, XIII, part 2, pp. 257, 315–16, 325. Cf. Ranajit Das Gupta, “Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply, 1855–1946,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 13: 3 (July-September 1976), 277–330.

<sup>14</sup>Morris D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); Dipesh Chakraborty, “Communal Riots and Labour: Bengals Jute Mill Hands in the 1890s,” paper presented at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, October, 1976.

remained comparatively rare. Workers' participation in food riots was one illustration of this. Railroad laborers, whose pay was in arrears, reacted to high grain prices and the refusal of traders to extend them credit, by looting the bazaars in Cuddalore, South Arcot, on Christmas Day 1876. It was a time when rising prices and fear of famine sparked off similar demonstrations in the markets of other towns and villages of the province.<sup>15</sup> In the second half of 1918 food riots and looting again swept through the Madras Presidency. Beginning in the rice-growing deltas of the Krishna and Godavari rivers in May, the disturbances reached the working-class areas in the north of Madras city in early September. In this case the spill-over from the countryside to the city is clear. During the three days of looting and rioting that followed, workers from the city's cotton mills and rail workshops were among the principal participants.<sup>16</sup> At Arkonam, North Arcot, and Nagappattinam, Thanjavur, railroad workers were also involved in incidents of actual or threatened looting.<sup>17</sup>

A further link between rural and industrial protest was "train-wrecking" — the sabotage of railroad tracks by the removal of rails and fish-plates or the placing of obstructions across the lines. All over India, both before and after the advent of organized unions, aggrieved railmen used this technique to put pressure on the management or to avenge themselves for what they felt to be wrongful dismissal. Most commonly the "trainwreckers" were the gangmen and plate-layers who labored on the lines, had access to the tools needed, and lived in villages alongside the tracks. In this respect "train-wrecking" was primarily the protest form of the semi-proletarianized section of the rail workers. Like food riots and famine dacoity it had the advantages of virtual anonymity. It did not depend for its effectiveness on solidarity with other workers; and implicitly it showed little faith in the capacity of unions or negotiations with management to redress grievances.<sup>18</sup>

Two further points should be noted here. Up to about 1920 industrial protest tended to reflect the rhythms, as well as the character, of rural protest, swelling in years of high food prices, often taking the form of food riots and looting, then dying away

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<sup>15</sup>W. Francis, *Madras District Gazetteers: South Arcot* (Madras: Government Press, 1906), pp. 181–82; *Madras Police Administration Report, 1876* (Madras: Foster, 1877), appendix C, p. xvii.

<sup>16</sup>G[overnment] O[rder] 2303, Home (Judicial), 11 October 1918, T.N.A.; David Arnold, "Looting, Grain Riots and Government Policy in South India, 1918," *Past and Present* 84 (August 1979): 111–45.

<sup>17</sup>*Hindu (Madras)*, 14 September 1918; G.O. 1446, Revenue (Special), 29 July 1919, T.N.A.

<sup>18</sup>Sabotage on the Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway between early August and late October 1920 was attributed to gangmen angered by the management's refusal to meet their union's demands and the defeat of their strike in June: Under-Secretary's Secret File, 308B, 29 November 1920, T.N.A. For a discussion of the phenomenon, see Dipesh Chakraborty, "Early Railwaymen in India: Dacoity and Train-Wrecking (c. 1860–1900)," in *Essays in Honour of Prof. S. C. Sarkar* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1976), pp. 523–50.

in years of cheaper, more plentiful grain. During this early period, before extensive unionization, industrial violence, like most protest, tended to be “reactive” rather than “proactive.”<sup>19</sup> It was directed not towards attaining new demands, such as higher wages or shorter hours, but to the defense of existing work practises, established wage levels and hours of work. Employees at the Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway’s Perambur workshops stopped work in May 1898 to protest the reduction of their hours (and hence pay) during a period of high prices and near famine. Workers in the same establishment rioted in December 1913 in opposition to unpopular administrative changes, particularly a new clocking-in procedure which in effect shortened the rest break and threatened heavy fines for lateness.<sup>20</sup> After 1920 and before 1947 there were no further major outbreaks of grain rioting, and industrial unrest increasingly reflected problems specific to the urban labor force: retrenchment, demands for higher pay, improved promotion prospects, and so forth. It is thus possible to see in south India a transition, like that in Europe at an earlier date,<sup>21</sup> from attacks on traders to demands, expressed through unions and strikes, for concessions from the industrial management.

Second, from the viewpoint of the employers and the government, the sabotage and destruction which accompanied many industrial disputes was wholly “irrational.” Often workers’ demands were not formulated and presented to the management before violence exploded, and its occurrence was more likely to obstruct than to assist the resolution of a dispute. Both the railroad’s managing agent and the magistrate who investigated the 1913 Perambur riot could see no rational explanation for such a furious outbreak. It began abruptly when workmen who had refused to follow the new clocking-in procedure after the midday break learned that they were to be fined half an hour’s pay. Workers in the carpentry shops then began to throw their mallets at the European supervisory staff: a hail of bricks, bolts, nuts and iron bars followed. The workmen broke open a box of sledgehammer handles and, thus armed, chased and threatened every European they could find, broke windows and smashed office furniture.<sup>22</sup> Apart from racial hostility (a factor discussed below), this

<sup>19</sup> Charles Tilly, Louise Tilly and Richard Tilly, *The Rebellious Century, 1830–1930* (London: Dent, 1975), pp. 50–51.

<sup>20</sup> *Madras Police Administration Report, 1898* (Madras: Government Press, 1899), pp. 3, 142; G.O. 195, Judicial, 27 January 1914, T.N.A.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Gaston V. Rimlinger, “The Legitimation of Protest: A Comparative Study in Labor History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2: 3 (April 1960), pp. 331–3; Charles Tilly, “The Changing Place of Collective Violence”, in Melvin Richter, ed., *Essays in Theory and History: An Approach to the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 139–64.

<sup>22</sup> G.O. 195, Judicial, 27 January 1914; G.O. 1303, Judicial, 5 June 1914, T.N.A.



explosiveness shows the same spontaneous anger and impulse for revenge to be found in rural looting and food riots. It also suggests an underlying hostility to the industrial environment — to its discipline, its seemingly arbitrary penalties, its high-handed supervisory staff — which could only find expression in periodic violence against property and management personnel. Here was an enduring and violent alienation.

Having thus sketched the rural origins of labor violence and its transference to the industrial work force, it is now possible to advance a stage further to show by reference to a specific example, the South Indian Railway strike of 1928, how violence of this kind occurred despite the attempts of union leaders and outside politicians to pursue non-violent tactics.

All the available evidence points to the determination of the strike organizers — both the railroad workers who formed the executive of the South Indian Railway Labor Union and their two communist advisers, M. Singaravelu Chetti of Madras and Mukundalal Sircar from Bengal — to hold a completely non-violent strike. After protracted negotiations with the railroad's Agent, they had failed to reach agreement on their basic demands: first, that retrenchment of some three thousand workshop employees, made redundant by the amalgamation of the three existing shops (at Nagappattinam, Podanur and Tiruchirapalli) into a single modernized shop at Golden Rock, should not proceed until guarantees of either re-employment or adequate lay-off benefits were given; and, second, that the wages of the lowest-paid employees, the gangmen, should be raised from Rupees 11–13, to Rs. 15–25. There were two phases to the strike. It began with a sit-in by men at the workshops on the morning of 28 June 1928, which, when the management closed the premises at lunchtime, became a lockout lasting for a month. The second phase started at midnight of July 19 when laborers throughout the South Indian Railway system stopped work. Out of a total labor force of 37,000, an estimated 17,000 to 20,000 joined the strike by sitting on the rails to obstruct trains or by absenting themselves from work.<sup>23</sup>

Both before and during the strike the leaders warned workers that if their agitation were to succeed they must avoid all violence, which would alienate the public and trigger government repression. As in many other strikes of the 1920s, the leaders tried to legitimize their campaign by couching it in Gandhian terms, calling both the workshop sit-in and the obstruction of trains *satyagraha*. This was in spite of Gandhi's own pronouncement, made in 1926 about a proposed sit-in at Nagappattinam, that *satyagraha* was "unlawful" in that form.<sup>24</sup> But, despite the careful organization and propaganda of the leaders, the strike plunged into violence almost as soon as it was

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<sup>23</sup>G.O. 2114, Public Works and Labor, 25 August 1928, T.N.A.; *RCL*, VIII, part 1, pp. 173, 588.

<sup>24</sup>*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi: Government of India, 1969), XXXI, p. 454.

extended from the workshops to the open lines. On July 20 and 21 there were scuffles between strikers and train crews who defied the strike call. At Tuticorin and Mayuram on July 20 and Villupuram on July 21 stones were thrown by strikers and railroad stores set on fire. Three trains were derailed between July 20 and July 23: 3 passengers were killed and 42 injured. On July 25 the death of 8 passengers in a bus which collided with locomotive at an unguarded level crossing near Tiruchirapalli led to a riot in which the engine-driver and fireman narrowly escaped being burned alive. According to the railroad management, the 10 days before the strike collapsed on July 30 produced 78 cases of obstruction and sabotage and a loss of Rs. 219,000 in damage to rolling stock, buildings and tracks.<sup>25</sup> Violence and destruction on such a scale had precisely the consequences the leaders had feared: the middle-class public and politicians were almost universal in their condemnation; state intervention was wholly on the side of the management; and the embarrassed leadership had to abandon the struggle without having gained any of its objectives.

The Government of Madras claimed that the two communists involved had deliberately planned a “programme of destruction” for revolutionary motives of their own. But this claim was refuted in the Madras High Court during the trial of fifteen of the strike leaders for conspiracy. The two European judges found that the leaders — railroad employees and communists alike — had sincerely advocated non-violent tactics. In neither their public speeches nor their private correspondence was there any indication that non-violence was merely the camouflage for a campaign of deliberate violence. The judges pointed out that the sit-in and lockout at the workshops had been free from sabotage and intimidation and that the areas nearest the shops were least affected by violence. They concluded that this was due to the greater control exercised by the leaders at and near the workshops while violence erupted where their influence was weakest, on the open lines and among the gangmen. Twelve of the leaders were sentenced to imprisonment, not for conspiracy to cause damage and foment violence, but because obstructing trains was an offense under the Railways Act.<sup>26</sup> Further evidence of the responsibility of the gangmen for acts of sabotage and violence came from other trials. In one case it was established that the removal of the fish-plates and bolts which caused the derailment of a train on July 21 was the work of gangmen who had broken into a gatehouse a few yards from the scene of the accident and stolen the tools needed.<sup>27</sup> Despite the exhortations of the leaders to eschew violence, many of the workers had clung, or reverted, to the old technique

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<sup>25</sup>*Report on Indian Railways, 1928–29* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1930), I, p. 69; *Hindu*, 6 August 1928.

<sup>26</sup>G.O. 422, Public, 28 March 1930, T.N.A.

<sup>27</sup>*Hindu*, 24 July 1928.

of “train-wrecking.” Others had soon lost patience with *satyagraha* on the rails and turned to more familiar, violent, tactics. Inadequate organization and control by the leadership would only partly explain the strikers’ reversion to violence. The strength and persistence of preindustrial forms of violent protest provides one explanation; the basic intolerance of the government and management to any strike action (however non-violent) offers another.

## II

The divergence so apparent in the South Indian Railway strike, between the union leaders and their outside advisers on one side and the mass of workers on the other, was a common feature of labor disputes in India between the two world wars. Had a more effective trade union movement developed, labor leaders might have been able to exercise greater control over the workers and to pursue their objectives more successfully through disciplined and peaceful strike action.

The unions’ limited effectiveness had more than a single cause. Although workers’ associations and unions had existed fitfully since the 1880s and 1890s (the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants dated from 1897) it was not until 1918–20 that large numbers of Indian industrial workers were unionized. The stimulus was rapid inflation and dwindling wage values, but the leadership of most of the unions formed at the close of World War I came from nationalist politicians interested in annexing industrial labor to the Indian National Congress to strengthen its claim to possess a “mass” base. The involvement of politicians from outside the factory gates was initially advantageous, for workers faced victimization if they took a prominent part in union affairs themselves. Politicians had, too, the education to formulate and the connections to publicize labor grievances. But, without first-hand experience of industry and with political objectives that were often at variance with those of the workers, politicians were not always the ablest or most loyal of labor leaders. By the time Gandhi’s first civil disobedience campaign was called off in February 1922, there was disillusionment on both sides.

By giving unions legal recognition for the first time, the Indian Trade Unions Act of 1926 freed members from the threat of prosecution (though not necessarily of victimization) and encouraged them to be more independent. Nevertheless, as the South Indian Railway strike showed, politicians continued to be influential in union affairs when labor unrest revived in the mid-1920s. This protracted involvement of outsiders tended either to subordinate workers’ interests to external political causes, or to create a rift between the workers and their nominal spokesmen. At times an

outside union official, called in by the management to explain the cause of a strike or disturbance, had to hurry along to the factory to investigate discontent of which he had hitherto been unaware. Some managers refused to negotiate with union officials who appeared to have so little control over the workers they claimed to represent.<sup>28</sup> Again, as Morris points out,<sup>29</sup> Indian unions were overly ambitious. Most attempted from the outset to represent workers of all grades in an industry rather than progressing, as in Britain and the United States, only at a considerably later date from craft-based associations for skilled workers to mass unions for skilled and unskilled.

Remote union officials and weak control clearly contributed to the frequency of wildcat strikes and violent outbreaks, at least until more experienced labor leadership began to develop from within the work force. But the greatest obstacle to a rapid transition from industrial violence to effective unionism and negotiation was the attitude of the government. This is ironic, for the government naturally saw itself as the guardian of “law and order” and the industrial workers as the source of violent conflict.

Until the advent of provincial autonomy and a popularly-elected Congress ministry in 1937, the Government of Madras clung to the principle of *laissez-faire* in industrial relations, holding that it was not its duty to interfere in disputes between employer and employee. In the period before the establishment and recognition of trade unions, it saw its responsibilities purely in terms of law enforcement. It was, for example, totally disinterested in the grievances which caused employees at the Nagappattinam rail workshops to riot in September 1896 — that was a matter for the management alone — but it was greatly concerned at the outbreak of rioting and sought measures to prevent a further “breach of the peace.”<sup>30</sup> The storm of industrial strife which swept the province in 1918–20, and its coincidence with nationalist agitation, made it difficult for the Madras government to continue to ignore the problems of industrial labor. Under pressure from the Government of India, it appointed a Commissioner of Labor in 1920. This proved little more than a gesture. The responsibilities of the Commissioner were ill-defined, and in a crisis like the South Indian Railway strike he held “strictly aloof” because his intervention had not been requested by both parties to the dispute.

In 1920–21 the Madras government also experimented with conciliation boards and courts of industrial enquiry: these were allowed to lapse with the decline in labor unrest in 1922. The 1926 Trade Unions Act provided for the registration of approved

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<sup>28</sup>For example the strike at the Choolai mills, Madras, April 1930: G.O.1366 (1-S), Public Works and Labor (Confidential), 1 May 1930, T.N.A.

<sup>29</sup>Morris, *Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force*, pp. 196–97.

<sup>30</sup>G.O. 110, Judicial, 19 January 1898, T.N.A.

unions but not for conciliation machinery. Three years later, the Trade Disputes Act authorized the setting up of *ad hoc* conciliation boards and courts of enquiry, but these remained virtually inoperative provisions until the Congress ministry of 1937–39. Then V. V. Giri, the Minister for Industries and Labor, and a former railroad union leader, tried to breathe life into the moribund legislation. This was no easy task. The legislation was cumbersome and phrased in language few workers could understand. Encouraged by Giri's promises of a new deal for labor, workers impatiently pressed demands which had been in abeyance during the Depression years. Their optimism soon turned to disappointment and bitter frustration when they found how slow and remote the formal process of arbitration and conciliation was. They were shocked and angered by the readiness of the Congress ministry to resort to police repression to quell labor militancy.

Even with a former union leader as Labor Minister, the Madras government remained basically hostile to strikes and picketing. Under pressure from London and New Delhi, it came to accept the legality of trade unions, but saw them either as mutual benefit societies or as agencies through which workers could be disciplined, their grievances aired, and management decisions enforced. "Healthy" trade unionism was held to be apolitical, eschewing outside leadership and party affiliation. Strikes might, it was conceded, be a very last resort after negotiations had failed to reach an agreement between unions and employers. Preferably, they were to be avoided altogether, and in key industries were virtually outlawed. The protest function, so prominent in Britain's own unions, was subordinated to a control function that amounted to the cooption of union officials by the management and the colonial state. This perverted unionism was not confined to India: it was common to other British colonial territories.<sup>31</sup> It was an interpretation of unionism that industrialists and managers readily adopted for it promised them a compliant labor leadership and a weapon, sanctioned by the state, for use against militant workers. In withdrawing his recognition of the South Indian Railway Labor Union shortly after the 1928 strike, the Agent explained that it should not be construed from this that he was opposed to unions as such. "I consider unions properly organised and wisely directed and counselled are most useful labor institutions ...,"<sup>32</sup> he said; and he proceeded to patronize and extend his formal recognition to a rival, moderate, union. But labor leaders who conformed to management–government expectations of their roles were likely to forfeit workers'

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<sup>31</sup>William H. Friedland, *Vuta Kamba: The Development of Trade Unions in Tanganyika* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), especially chapter 1,

<sup>32</sup>*Hindu*, 2 August 1928. For a detailed discussion of government and management attitudes to unions during the Congress ministry, see David Arnold, "Labour Relations in a South Indian Sugar Factory, 1937–39," *Social Scientist* (Trivandrum), 65 (December 1977), 16–33.

support, or to find, once again, a divergence between their tactics and those of the workers they purported to represent.

Although by the 1940s government attitudes had shifted from outright hostility to unions to qualified approval of them, from *laissez-faire* to state-sponsored conciliation and arbitration, in one fundamental respect the nature of government involvement remained unaltered. Despite professions of neutrality between capital and labor, the government repeatedly used state power to support the employers and to thwart effective strike action.

The government's handling of the South Indian Railway strike was characteristic. It refused to mediate in the dispute though the labor leaders and the press urged it to do so. Instead it relied for its understanding of the crisis on police reports (a most unsympathetic source) and information provided by the Agent. As the executive head of a state-controlled enterprise, the Agent enjoyed extremely close relations with the government, and there is some indication that he allowed the dispute to come to a show-down secure in the knowledge that the state would support him against the strikers once it became a "law and order" issue. Even before the strike began, the government took precautionary steps that favored the Agent. Two developments were anticipated. One was rioting and violence at the workshops, and to pre-empt this several hundred armed police were sent to Nagappattinam and Tiruchirapalli. The other was a strike affecting the main-line junctions and stations. To counter this the South Indian Railway police, numbering nearly 700 officers and men, were posted at strategic points.

Despite these preparations, the initial scale and effectiveness of the strike took the authorities by surprise. Harrassed district magistrates and police superintendents scurried from one place on the line to another, trying to persuade the thousands of men, women and children obstructing the lines to allow trains through. Sometimes, with patience and good humor, they succeeded. But it was not long before the Agent and the government regained the initiative. Good humor vanished and attitudes on both sides hardened. A company of paramilitary police was ordered to Tiruchirapalli on July 21; detachments of armed police escorted every train; and village watchmen guarded the tracks at night to deter saboteurs. The government also considered calling out troops. The Criminal Procedure Code was invoked to prohibit meetings by strike leaders or those in sympathy with the strike, first in Madras, and subsequently in ten other centers. The arrest of strike leaders began on July 23, and in all more than 300 railmen were arrested.

There were several clashes between police and strikers, resulting in the death of one striker and injury to many others. The government approved police "firmness" and censured officials who failed to "assert authority." An Indian magistrate and police

superintendent who tried, without resort to force, to persuade a large crowd to leave the tracks near Villupuram on July 21, were said by the Inspector-General of Police to have allowed matters to reach “a dangerous pitch” — though it was the later firing of a revolver by a European police officer which provoked serious crowd violence. The Inspector-General added that “the endeavor to argue an unreasoning mob into a state of sanity, combined with an unwillingness to adopt forceful measures, proved merely provocative.” He contrasted this with Madurai, where “an exhibition of organized force rendered abortive the designs of the strike leaders” at an early stage.<sup>33</sup>

After the strike’s defeat, the government claimed that the police and magistracy had taken “no action beyond that dictated by their responsibilities for the preservation of the public peace.” The labor leaders thought otherwise. In calling off the strike on July 30, they protested that “In an economic fight between capital and labor, police repression should find no place, but we find to our dismay that they act more as creatures of capital than as the custodians of public peace, law and order.”<sup>34</sup> Having set out to take on the management, the unionists found themselves embroiled in an unequal contest with the colonial state.

The workers were not, it should be noted, hostile to the state as such. The 1928 strike was one of the many instances when industrial workers sought, in vain, for sympathetic government investigation into their grievances. But their attitude to the police was one of total enmity. In town and countryside alike, the subordinate police were immensely unpopular for their bribe-taking, their use of torture and intimidation, and their identification with landlords and industrialists. The arrival of the police during an industrial dispute, as much as during a village brawl, revived long and bitter memories of petty police tyranny and quickly made them the target for crowd hostility. In an industrial dispute, strikers resented that, by calling in the police, the management avoided dealing with them directly and that blacklegs protected by the police might defeat their strike and steal their jobs. The arrival of the police was, therefore, likely to start an escalation of violence. Police retaliated against stone-throwing strikers with bayonet- or *lathi*-charges, or they opened fire without allowing the crowd time to cool its anger or disperse. Death or injury to a few strikers would often provoke greater indignation and violence until, finally, further shooting broke up the crowd and the police regained control.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>G.O. 733, Public, 31 August 1928; G.O. 974, Public (Conf.), 1 November 1928; G.O. 171, Judicial (Conf.), 1 April 1929, T.N.A.

<sup>34</sup>G.O. 733, Public, 31 August 1928, T.N.A.; *Hindu*, 30 July 1928.

<sup>35</sup>For example, *Report of the Non-Official Enquiry Committee regarding the Shooting of Millhands at the Cawnpore Cotton Mills Company* (Kanpur: Mercantile Press, 1924), pp. 8–12. For an example of violence against police escorting blacklegs, see the account of disturbances during the strike at the Buckingham

The disproportionate scale of police retaliation reflected the readiness of the colonial authorities to use force to resolve conflict situations or simply to overawe and intimidate strikers. It was also expressive of their racist contempt for a colonized people. No British government, at least since the early nineteenth century, would have condoned such repeated and indiscriminating use of firearms against unarmed strikers in Britain. But in India life was held cheap — the life, that is, of the colonized. It is, therefore, appropriate at this stage to examine more closely race as a factor in industrial violence.

### III

Racial conflict was inherent in the colonial system of industrial labor management. Its origins lay further back, in the Europeans' racial arrogance and physical maltreatment of Indian servants and employees. As early as August 1789 the *Calcutta Gazette* had cause to deplore "the custom of flogging [Indian] servants," more than a century later, Sir Henry Cotton recorded that the "pernicious practice of striking natives, and especially domestic servants," still prevailed in the second half of the nineteenth century as "a common and general habit ...;" and in 1896 Ram Gopal Sanyal listed 134 cases of racial violence (mainly by European planters, soldiers and overseers) which were sufficiently notorious to have reached the courts or the English press but which, almost invariably, met with inadequate punishment or official investigation.<sup>36</sup> It is not surprising that an attitude of racial contempt so widespread among the European community, so ineffectively punished by the courts, should infect industrial relations from the outset.

European managers and supervisors were generally absent from industries financed by Indian capital and run by Indian management, such as the cotton mills of Bombay, Ahmedabad and Coimbatore; but even Tata's iron and steel works at Jamshedpur employed Europeans as technicians and supervisors. The jute mills of Bengal, the cotton mills of Madras and Madurai, the indigo works of eastern India, the tea and coffee plantations of Assam and the south, the railroads throughout India — all employed substantial numbers of Europeans. In 1911, the railroads of the Madras Presidency employed 2,817 Europeans and Eurasians out of a total work force of 52,257; 142 of the 148 railroad officials were Europeans or Eurasians, as were 961 of

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and Carnatic Mills, Madras, in December 1920, in G.O. 779, Public, 14 December 1920, T.N.A.

<sup>36</sup>Selections from the *Calcutta Gazette* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1865), II, p. 223; Sir Henry Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1911), p. 65; Ram Gopal Sanyal, *The Record of Criminal Cases between Europeans and Natives for the last Hundred Years* (Calcutta: Sanyal, 1896).



the 1,264 subordinates earning Rs. 75 or more a month. In 1921, 157 of the 276 foremen in mechanical and engineering workshops (including those of the railroads) were Europeans and Eurasians.<sup>37</sup> It was not until the 1920s, with mounting political pressure for Indianization, that many European companies and state-managed enterprises (like the railroads) reluctantly began to promote Indians to senior positions.

Recruited directly from Britain, or from the British Army, regarding Britain as the home to which they would return on retirement, residing and seeking their recreation in a racially-exclusive housing colony and club, the white supervisory staff and management showed great reluctance to understand the culture of their Indian subordinates or to learn more than a few abusive phrases of the vernacular. Even domiciled Europeans and Eurasians shared these attitudes: indeed, they may have been the more important to them in establishing their identity with the dominant white community. At the height of labor unrest at the Buckingham and Carnatic textile mills in Madras in 1921, the European management isolated two administrative problems which it felt underlay the current industrial conflict. One was that European standards of “strict discipline and cleanliness ... were not in accordance with the tastes of the work people” and thus generated friction between mill-hands and supervisors. The other was that the management “found it impossible to get their British superintendents of different departments to learn the vernaculars, Tamil and Telugu . . .”<sup>38</sup> It is, perhaps, an indication of the broader division between European staff and Indian workers that many of the demands put forward in strikes in the 1920s had a cultural basis rather than an economic one — leave to celebrate Hindu festivals, for example, or permission for Muslims to hold Friday prayers.<sup>39</sup>

Across this linguistic and cultural divide, it was more than usually difficult in early industrial capitalism for workers to communicate their grievances and receive a tolerant response. Even in the Indian-managed mills of Bombay, linguistic differences between the English- and Gujarati-speaking management and the Marathi-speaking mill-hands presented a problem of communication unparalleled in the experience of textile mills in Britain and New England.<sup>40</sup> The divide was the more acute in European-managed factories in India where it was accentuated by the racial contempt in which the Europeans and Eurasians generally held Indian workers. It was not uncommon before 1920 for white supervisors and managers to resort to petty violence

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<sup>37</sup>*Census of India: Madras, 1911* (Madras: Government Press, 1912), XII, part 1; *Census of India: Madras, 1921*, XIII, part 2, pp. 215–16.

<sup>38</sup>“Notes on Situation in Madras,” Home Political, 93/1/1921, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>39</sup>See the evidence from Bengal in *RCL*, V, part 1, pp. 122–23.

<sup>40</sup>Morris D. Morris, “The Recruitment of an Indian Labor Force in India, with British and American Comparisons,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2:3 (April 1960), pp. 324–25.

to express their annoyance with Indian workers who ignored or failed to understand their directions. But even a European supervisor whose kicks and punches led to the death of an Indian laborer was likely to escape before the courts with a light fine.<sup>41</sup> When workers downed tools or hurled missiles in protest, Europeans (especially before about 1920) were likely to reach for their revolvers to threaten them unless they returned to work. Following shooting by European staff at the Budge Budge Jute Mill on the outskirts of Calcutta in 1895, the Bengal government issued a statement “strongly deprecate[ing] the practice of employing firearms to put down demonstrations on the part of the employees of the mills.” It averred that “the occasions on which recourse to such weapons is really necessary are of the rarest possible occurrence, and that there are few crowds of native workmen who would not yield to firm and reasonably conciliatory action on the part of the European managers and assistants.”<sup>42</sup>

Nonetheless, such incidents persisted, and not only in Bengal. Although the riot, referred to earlier, at the Perambur rail workshops in 1913 arose from workers’ opposition to new clocking-in procedures, racial hostility greatly contributed to the violence that followed. The workers began by throwing missiles at the European and Eurasian foremen and managerial staff, who retaliated by opening fire on the workmen, killing two and injuring three others. One Indian who was so incensed as to expose his private parts and dare a European to shoot at them found himself in hospital shortly after with bullet wounds in his shoulder. Although the shooting took place before the police could arrive and without magisterial authority, the action of the European staff was approved by the local magistrate (and subsequently by the government) on the grounds that “nothing short of wounding and perhaps of killing was sufficient to quell the rioters and that had the riot not been stopped when it was, very grave consequences to life and property would have ensued.” The Indian press protested that “very grave consequences” had already ensued for the Indians involved and that it was illegal for Europeans to take the law into their own hands in this fashion.<sup>43</sup> In 1918–21 there were a number of instances of European violence against Indian workers in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills and of Indian reprisals. On 20 October 1920 weavers sat in the doorway of the European Weaving Master’s office and refused to let him out (a form of protest, known as *gherao*, common in India today). “When, after waiting for a long time, he attempted to get out the weavers assaulted him and threw spindles at him, and when he took out a revolver he had in his pocket they rushed at him, snatched the revolver from his hands and assaulted

<sup>41</sup> For such a case, see Bengal Judicial, nos. 12–16, 14 April 1885, India Office Library, London.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Karnik, *Strikes in India*, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> G.O. 1303, Judicial, 5 June 1914; G.O.s 195–6, Judicial, 27 January 1914, T.N.A.

him. ...”<sup>44</sup> An upsurge of hatred against European and Eurasian supervisors and managers sometimes spread beyond the factory compound. In July 1921 workers at the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills threatened to invade the residential quarters of the European mill staff, and in February 1942 they dragged Eurasians from buses passing the factory gates.<sup>45</sup> As these illustrations suggest, racial antipathy was a source of violence by workers and supervisors alike.

Racial violence was not confined to the worker–manager or worker–supervisor relationship. It extended deep into the work force in industries where there were large numbers of European and Eurasian subordinates. The railroads were the primary example of this. While most of the higher appointments and technical posts went to Europeans selected in Britain, many of the permanent-way inspectors, workshop technicians, train-drivers and guards were appointed locally from ex-soldiers of the British Army, from Europeans born and brought up in India, and from Eurasians. A writer in the *Calcutta Review* in 1859 observed that many of the Europeans employed on the railroads as subordinates were “rough, uneducated men. ... The ill-feeling that has arisen between the natives and European workmen on the railways is generally caused by inability to understand one another ...”<sup>46</sup> Lowly in the sight of the white elite, these European and Eurasian subordinates enjoyed (and jealously preserved) a privileged position as a racially defined aristocracy of labor. Their wages were double or treble those of Indians who held similar jobs on the railroads; they received special leave concessions and were allocated superior residential accommodation. Racial discrimination permeated every aspect of life and work on the railroads, and the Europeans and Eurasians had their own railway institutes (recreation centers) and special schools for their children, some locally, many in the hills. Indians were denied these, or offered inferior substitutes. Demands for equal opportunity and privileges became as central to Indian railmen’s petitions and strike objectives by the late 1920s as they were to be for their African counterparts a generation later.<sup>47</sup>

The European and Eurasian subordinates had grievances of their own against the management. Dating from about 1877, the Eurasian and Anglo–Indian Association (later the Anglo–Indian and Domiciled European Association) acted as a spokesman for rail workers opposing Indianization and the influx of superior European staff from outside India. At the close of World War I inflation and the prevailing mood of industrial unrest impelled a number of European and Eurasian subordinates to

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<sup>44</sup> *RCL*, VII, part 1, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> G.O. 671, Public, 7 Oct 1921; G.O. 1130, Public (Conf.), 8 April 1942, T.N.A.

<sup>46</sup> “English Life in Bengal,” *Calcutta Review*, XXXIII (December 1859), p. 325.

<sup>47</sup> See the evidence presented by rail unions in *RCL*, VIII, part 1; cf. R. D. Grillo, *Race, Class and Militancy: An African Trade Union, 1939–1965* (New York: Chandler Publishing Co., 1974), chapter 4.

agitate for higher wages. But within a very short time they identified themselves with the management in opposition to the Indians' strikes and unions. One reason for this was that the management responded more promptly to their demands for extra allowances and bonuses than to those of the far more numerous Indian railmen — thus deepening the latter's sense of grievance and discrimination.<sup>48</sup> But the advent of popular nationalist agitation played a part. In one of several such cases in the 1920s, Indian railmen in the United Provinces struck work in February 1922 in protest against the alleged assault on an Indian fireman by a Eurasian engine-driver.<sup>49</sup> Such incidents were not new, but popular nationalism and unionization made Indians more resentful of their inferior and abused position, and the nationalist press was quick to publicize racial grievances. By 1930 European and Eurasian subordinates were so alarmed by progressive Indianization and so alienated from the Indian labor movement as to have begun forming their own unions.<sup>50</sup>

The South Indian Railway was not immune from these developments, but in the hope of ensuring effective strike action in 1928 the labor leaders appealed to Eurasian subordinates to ally themselves with other workers in opposition to the Agent. At first, if only from fear of intimidation, the Eurasians stayed away. Then, as the Agent and the government introduced strong police protection for train crews, the Eurasians came down decisively on the side of the management and enabled it to maintain a skeleton service. This infuriated the strikers, who not only saw them as strikebreakers, but were also confirmed in their basic hostility to the Eurasians as a privileged group, loyal to the management and not to the workers as a whole. Stones were thrown at engines, Eurasian train-drivers and firemen were forced out of their cabins, jostled, insulted, and threatened with knives. The riot which followed the collision at Comerford level-crossing on July 25 of a light engine and a bus owed much of its spontaneity and ferocity to the fact that the engine-driver and firemen were Eurasians.<sup>51</sup>

There was one further dimension to racial conflict between Indian and European or Eurasian railmen. While Indians outside the police and army were generally denied access to firearms, almost all European and Eurasian railroad employees were enrolled in militia or territorial army units known as the Volunteers and, after World War I, as the Auxiliary Force (India). These units were used to quell disturbances when police forces were inadequate or troops unavailable. Sometimes in the 1920s, such as in 1926 and again in 1928 on the South Indian Railway, they were mobilized for use against

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<sup>48</sup> G.O. 660, Public (Conf.), 9 October 1920, T.N.A.

<sup>49</sup> L/P&J/6/902 of 1922, India Office Library. See also Karnik, *Strikes in India*, pp. 71, 78, 135, 205.

<sup>50</sup> RCL, VIII, part 1, pp. 602–29; part 2, pp. 332–38.

<sup>51</sup> *Hindu*, 25 June, 30 June, 19 July, 22 July, 25 July, 26 July 1928; G.O. 789, Public (Conf.), 15 September 1928, T.N.A.

Indian strikers. To be faced by fellow-railmen, captained by senior railroad officials, uniformed and armed, cannot have endeared the European and Eurasian subordinates to their Indian colleagues.

## CONCLUSION

Detailed and quantitative comparisons would be difficult to compile, but rural labor in India was probably no more or less disposed to violence than in other peasant societies. Gandhian non-violence and the peaceful withdrawal of labor had their rural antecedents, but there existed, too, a powerful tradition of collective violent protest and resistance, especially among the rural poor. As in other countries in which industrialization was taking place, Indian workers, immigrant from the countryside, brought with them their “reactive” forms of protest, and, as in the case of food riots, might continue to share them with the rural population. Neither the character of capitalist relations between Indian workers and their employers, nor the condition in which workers lived and labored, differed greatly from elsewhere. But what accentuated conflict and sustained a high level of violence in Indian industry (and, it may be conjectured, in that of similar societies) was its peculiar colonial and racial context. First, large-scale unionization (beginning at the close of World War I), then, in 1926, the legal recognition of trade unions, and, finally, in the late 1930s, the establishment of conciliation and arbitration machinery by the state — these stages outwardly gave increasing security to the Indian labor movement. But they thinly disguised the continuing hostility of the colonial state to assertive unionism and especially to strikes and picketing. Government and management insistence on a form of unionism that provided little scope for effective industrial action, coupled with police intervention and repression, prevented workers from finding satisfactory expression for their grievances and demands through institutional channels. By default, they clung to their violent traditions. In addition, the racial division between Indian workers and European managers and supervisors exacerbated the class conflict inherent in early industrial capitalism. The readiness with which Europeans used force against Indian workers, and the state’s failure or disinclination to prevent them, made racial aggression and retaliation a primary source of industrial conflict. This pattern of racial violence was replicated at a lower level in industries, like the railroads, employing large numbers of European and Eurasian subordinates.

It might be said against this contention that colonialism and racism were basic causes of the high level of industrial violence in India, that the end of British rule and the departure of Europeans from Indian industry has not led to any great diminution

of violence. For that there must be several explanations, but one may be noted here. Independence did not bring about a fundamental change in the character of industrial relations. The Indian state apparatus, especially the police, and the Indian and international managers of the post-independence period, have perpetuated and elaborated, indeed have made their own, attitudes towards labor that formerly characterized colonial India.